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**PROTRACTED CONFLICT AND CHANGED DISCOURSES:
A SURVEY OF THE DISCOURSES OF AZERBAIJANI LEADERSHIP**

Tural İSMAYILZADA¹

Abstract: Close to the end of 2020, the nominal ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke and the clashes turned into a large-scale warfare. While this development was portrayed as unexpected by some, an inquiry into discourses may prove the opposite. This article therefore aims to reveal the changes in Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's discourses on the Armenia-Azerbaijan relations and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict throughout his administration. Two periods, 2003–2018 and 2018–2020, are compared as there occurred significant changes on the both sides to the conflict. The author uses politolinguistic discourse analysis to qualitatively analyze nominations, predications, and argumentations employed by Aliyev. The findings have shown that Aliyev has diversified both nominations and predications and put forward more arguments that signaled continuation of enmity and escalation of the conflict since 2018. This study has been an attempt to fill the gap in the literature related to conflict and discourse at large and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in particular.

Keywords: *Armenia, Azerbaijan, Conflict, Discourse, Nagorno-Karabakh.*

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SÜRÜNCEMEDE KALMIŞ ÇATIŞMA VE DEĞİŞTİRİLEN SÖYLEMLER:**AZERBAYCAN CUMHURBAŞKANI'NIN SÖYLEMLERİ ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA**

Öz: 2020'nin sonlarına doğru Ermenistan ile Azerbaycan arasında sözde ateşkes bozuldu ve çatışmalar geniş çaplı bir savaşa dönüştü. Bu gelişme, bazıları tarafından beklenmedik olarak tasvir edilirken, söylemler üzerine bir araştırma bunun tam tersini kanıtlayabilir. Dolayısıyla, bu makale, Azerbaycan Cumhurbaşkanı İlham Aliyev'in yönetimi boyunca Ermenistan-Azerbaycan ilişkileri ve Dağlık Karabağ Sorunu ile ilgili söylemlerindeki değişiklikleri ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çatışmanın her iki tarafında da önemli değişiklikler meydana geldiğinden, 2003–2018 ve 2018–2020 olmak üzere iki dönem karşılaştırılmaktadır. Aliyev tarafından kullanılan adlandırmalar, yüklemlemeler ve argümanları nitel olarak analiz etmek için politolinguistik söylem analizi kullanılmaktadır. Bulgular, Aliyev'in 2018'den bu yana hem adlandırmalar, hem de yüklemlemeleri çeşitlendirdiğini ve uyuşmazlığın devam edeceğine ve çatışmanın tırmanacağına işaret eden daha fazla argüman ortaya koyduğunu göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, literatürdeki genelde çatışma ve söylem ilişkisi, özelde ise Dağlık Karabağ Sorunu konusunda mevcut olan boşluğu doldurmaya yönelik bir girişim olarak görülmelidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Ermenistan, Azerbaycan, Çatışma, Söylem, Dağlık Karabağ.*

Introduction

The Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict has long been recognized as an utmost threat to the regional security in the South Caucasus. Despite the parties' consent in 1994 to establish ceasefire and hold further negotiations to solve the conflict peacefully, recent armed clashes have raised the question of whether the peace talks can achieve any progress. The violation of truce in April 2016 and July 2020 showed that the efforts by the international community are of no effect unless the parties build mutual confidence and exhibit constructive position towards the resolution process and each other.

In the light of what is called as the Second Karabakh War near the end of 2020, the investigation of the positions held by the parties prior to the war may provide a better understanding of the escalation. Equally important, yet not studied adequately is the change in the positions of the parties. The positions and their change can be analyzed in a variety of ways. This study employs discourse analysis in order to reveal the discursive changes and differences in the position of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev before the Velvet Revolution in Armenia, which coincided with Aliyev's election as the President for the fourth term and the period from that revolution to the outbreak of the war.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section provides a review of the literature on discourses and conflict. In this part, various studies that have shown the role of discourses in conflict settings are reviewed. Next section presents a brief analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by illustrating the situation and developments prior to the war, both between and within the parties. The paper then goes on to the current study covering the employed methods and findings. The findings are given in two separate sections in order to delve into the two periods in detail. The findings are discussed and a summary of the research is presented in the last section. Moreover, the limitations of the study and the proposed direction for further research are given in this part of the paper.

1. Discourses and Conflict

Discourse analysis has become a widely employed method in various fields of social science. Likewise, political discourse analysis has gained huge attention with the emergence of constructivism and post-structuralism in Political Science and International Relations. In the meantime, previously overlooked social factors in international domain such as identity, speech

acts, and intersubjectivity have been placed in focus by scholarly works. Last decade has witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of research articles that focused on discourses. The growth has also been observed in the thematic scope and geography of discourse research.²

In spite of its frequent usage recently, discourse is one of those concepts that have been iterated so widely and deeply that it is now quite challenging to find a universally accepted understanding and definition of it.³ Gee defines discourse as “*an interpretation of an interpretation*”.⁴ That is, our understanding and consequently discourses do not reflect the world around us as it is; rather, we interpret what we perceive when we express our views about what exists and occurs. Moreover, he argues that discourses as a part of language are not only what we say, but also constitute and influence what we do and who we are. Therefore, discourses should be analyzed along with actions and identities.⁵

Aydın-Düzgit and Rumelili refer to Foucauldian and Habermasian approaches to discourse and conclude that they use the concept in a number of meanings that are different, but inherently connected.⁶ Nevertheless, one may find numerous differing approaches to discourse in the academic literature. Most of the work on the topic has put an emphasis on the relationship between discourses and practices. However, they argue that there is no consensus among scholars when it comes to determine to what extent practices shape discourses and vice versa.

In the light of the abovementioned multiplicity of conceptions of discourse, discourse analysis as a research method neither has a single fashion. Recent scholarship on political discourse analysis has held a critical stance towards the conventional use of the method. For example, Hay maintains that political discourse analysis as a method has had a number of shortcomings that should be overcome. Firstly, it should not be narrowed down. Rather, we need to be open to multiplicity of methods when analyzing, particularly political, discourses. It would be erroneous to defend the accuracy of one method over another. Another mistake is suggested to be the attempt to draw a firm line between political and other discourses. Political domain is so

² François Randour & Julien Perrez & Min Reuchamps (2020), “Twenty years of research on political discourse: A systematic review and directions for future research”, *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 1, No: 16, p. 3.

³ Ruth Wodak (2008), “Introduction: Discourse Studies – Important Concepts and Terms”, in *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in The Social Sciences* (eds. by Ruth Wodak & Michal Krzyzanowski), Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴ James Paul Gee (2011), *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, New York: Routledge, p. 122.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ See; Senem Aydın-Düzgit & Bahar Rumelili (2018), “Discourse analysis: Strengths and shortcomings”, *All Azimuth*, Vol. 1, No: 21.

interwoven with other domains that discerning political would lead to neglect of many important aspects. Therefore, an analyst ought to elaborate on a range of elements of discourse.⁷ Despite the critique posed by this newly emerging group of scholars who propose a wider and deeper scope when analyzing discourses, studies are principally based on the definition given by Van Dijk, which draws upon “*the actors, the political scope of the discourse and the context of communication*”.⁸

In addition to their significance in politics, discourses are a crucial aspect of conflicts. The parties to a conflict, implicitly or explicitly, express their positions in a variety of forms. It is worth mentioning here that this does not necessarily have to be speech acts. As mentioned earlier, discourses enable us to understand not only their positions, but also identities and actions. Smith suggests that discourses are of utmost significance in conflict settings in two opposite ways. On the one hand, it is argued that political rhetoric is employed to mobilize groups against each other. The presence of differences and incompatibilities is not enough for a war to start or a conflict to escalate, but political mobilization created with hostile discourses leads groups towards conflict. Two parties never become adversaries unless at least one calls the other so. Notwithstanding, discourses can also play a great role in driving adversaries towards reconciliation. The language used by parties may foster confidence and alleviate hostility.⁹

When discourses used by disputants are analyzed, nationalist and populist discourses are found to prevail. Thus, the link between language, discourse, and nationalism has been studied in order to construe an operational explanation of wars. Nationalist discourses are suggested to have been one of the most frequently used instruments of wars. This type of language is called the mechological language which contains “*rigidity, precision, ideology, addiction to hierarchy and bureaucracy*”.¹⁰ Whereas, language can also perform as a tool of peace when it is ecological.

⁷ Colin Hay (2013), “Political discourse analysis: The dangers of methodological absolutism”, *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 11, pp. 323-324.

⁸ François Randour et al. (2020), “Twenty years of research on political discourse: A systematic review and directions for future research”, *Discourse & Society*, p. 2.

⁹ Dan Smith (1997), “Language and discourse in conflict and conflict resolution”, *Current Issues in Language & Society*, Vol. 4, No: 3.

¹⁰ Ricky Snyders (2003), “Mechologic and ecologic: Blueprints for war and peace”, *Language Matters: Studies in the Languages of Africa*, Vol. 34, No:1, p. 83.

That is, parties admit and utter the existence of truths behind their own¹¹, which establishes room for empathy, mutual understanding, and finding a common ground.

Discourses pose a tremendous opportunity to conflict studies as they offer a thorough understanding of “*Self*” and “*Other*”. Studying identity of self and other through discourses is a commonly adopted strategy for analysts. Epstein argues that intersubjectivity in International Relations come up with the positions voiced by individuals representing states as “*states, like individuals, position themselves in relation to other states by adopting certain discourses and not others*”.¹² Discourses carry particular importance when one seeks to reveal changes in a relatively consistent state position. Under the consistent rule of the same administration, discourse analysis helps trace the unseen patterns of policy shifts. On the other hand, discourses are suggested to express constructed meanings, positions, and subjective interpretations of the reality rather than the objective truth itself.¹³ This feature of discourse analysis supports our argument that conflict analysis can be done more adequately if discourses uttered by the political leaders of the adversaries are scrutinized. Moreover, this method of analysis eliminates the constraints posed by a priori perception of presupposed positions and interests of the parties to a conflict and provides a wider outlook on how positions and interests are constructed and change in the course of conflict.

Various past and ongoing conflicts have been studied from a range of perspectives based on the discourses of the adversaries. For example, Karmazin analyzes the conflict over Taiwan by focusing on the nationalist discourses of the Chinese (PRC) leadership. By doing so, he has revealed that nationalist discourse not only has the capability to create and trigger conflict, but it may foster mutual rapprochement by building a common ground.¹⁴ Dembinska and Iglesias examine how a multiethnic identity has been constructed by the leadership of the separated region Transnistria.¹⁵ Different levels and aspects of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia have been analyzed by concentrating on discourses of political leaders, media outlets, and third

¹¹ Lawrie Barnes (2003), “Language, war and peace: An overview”, *Language Matters: Studies in the Languages of Africa*, Vol. 34, No: 1, p. 11.

¹² Charlotte Epstein (2011), “Who speaks? Discourse, the subject and the study of identity in international politics”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, No: 2, p. 341.

¹³ Lene Hansen (2006), *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, London: Routledge, p. 6.

¹⁴ Ales Karmazin (2017), “China’s nationalist discourse and Taiwan”, *China Report*, Vol. 53, No: 4.

¹⁵ Magdalena Dembinska & Julien D. Iglesias (2013), “The making of an empty Moldovan category within a multiethnic Transnistrian nation”, *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 27, No: 3.

parties.¹⁶¹⁷¹⁸ Mullin investigates the role of discourses in the Israel–Palestine peace process by identifying the key aspects of discourses that frame Hamas as the primary inhibitor of the peaceful resolution.¹⁹ Analysis of discourses in conflict settings helps develop a more comprehensive insight into the conflict and its different overlooked elements, which are often crossed out by conventional academic approaches and media coverages.

2. Conflict Between Armenia and Azerbaijan: A Quarter Century's Status Quo or Not?

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of those conflicts that is seemingly being forgotten by the international community and slipping through the cracks. Yet, there have occurred significant developments between the parties, which require a close attention. Violation of the nominal ceasefire reached in 1994 has escalated into large-scale clashes a number of times, as it happened in April 2016 and July 2020. The latest skirmishes attracted huge international and domestic attention thanks to the information war on the social media platforms.²⁰ The so-called 4-Day War/April War, whereas, is argued to have caused hundreds of death toll from both sides. This was remarkable because, for the first time since 1994, the line of contact has changed and Azerbaijan has gained control over several strategically significant heights.²¹ The latest and most conclusive of all has been the so-called 44-Day War that started on September 27, 2020 and ended with a trilateral ceasefire statement signed by Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Russian leaders on November 10. Azerbaijan was the evident winner as it recaptured a major proportion of its previously occupied territories including almost the total territories of Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Zangilan, Gubadli, Lachin, Kalbajar, and Aghdam districts, 5 cities, 4 settlements, and 286 villages.²²

¹⁶ Olga Baysha (2018), “Synecdoche that kills: How Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin constructed different Ukraines for different ends”, *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 80, No: 3.

¹⁷ Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2019), “Fake news and ‘RussiaGate’ discourses: Propaganda in the post-truth era”, *Journalism*, Vol. 20, No: 1.

¹⁸ Olga Pasitselska (2017), “Ukrainian crisis through the lens of Russian media: Construction of ideological discourse”, *Discourse & Communication*, Vol. 11, No: 6.

¹⁹ Corinna Mullin (2010), “Islamist challenges to the ‘liberal peace’ discourse: The case of Hamas and the Israel—Palestine ‘Peace Process’”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 39, No: 2.

²⁰ *BBC* (2020), “Azerbaijan protesters demand war after Armenia clashes”, 15.07.2020, Date of Accession: 12.12.2020 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53415693>.

²¹ Bradley Jardine (2018), “Armenians and Azerbaijanis commemorate two years since breakout of ‘April War’”, *Eurasianet*, 02.04.2018, Date of Accession: 16.12.2020 from <https://eurasianet.org/armenians-and-azerbaijanis-commemorate-two-years-since-breakout-of-april-war>.

²² Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2020), “Azerbaijani cities, settlements and villages liberated from occupation”, 20.11. 2020, Date of Accession: 14.12.2020 from <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/azerbaijani-cities-settlements-and-villages-liberated-from-occupation-11189.html>.

Other than the frequent breaking of ceasefire, there have been several shifts that have had a strong impact on changing the state of relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Political upheavals and changes in the leadership are of those developments. The tracking of notable events in the political domains of both sides shows that a closer look into them would help reveal how profound repercussions have transpired. These events and developments include the changes in political systems, leadership, and discourses related to the conflict. It is essential to acknowledge that the former two are not independent from the latter and thus, have complex causal relationships with it. In other words, a new leadership taking the rule in one side or global shift in its political system makes the other revise its position towards the conflict and the adversary and consequently a new discursive expression is shaped.

By the same token, while Azerbaijan has remained as a presidential republic since regaining its independence in 1991 and has been governed by President Ilham Aliyev since 2003, Armenia has transformed from presidential into parliamentary republic in 2018 and has been ruled by two Presidents between 2003 and 2018, and four Prime Ministers ever since, of whom only one has been able to hold the office for over two years, unlike the rest spending only a few days in administration due to the turmoil of the Velvet Revolution.²³ Azerbaijani President, therefore, has had to deal primarily with 3 different personalities and 2 distinct systems.

In the aftermath of the revolution, with the ensuing democratization process in Armenia, many argued that the newly emerging dynamics within Armenia were going to have serious consequences for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.^{24,25} Although there have not been any substantial results in the peace talks even after the start of the promising progress in Armenia, one may observe that a subtle change has been occurring in various aspects of the conflict and its parties. For instance, in February 2020, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President took part in a public debate as a part of the Munich Security Conference. This kind of dialog was first-of-a-kind as the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan appeared in a live debate in front of the press and larger public for the first time in the history of the conflict.

²³ Kendrick Foster (2019), "Armenia's Velvet Revolution: Lessons from the Caucasus", *Harvard International Review*, 29.05.2019, Date of Accession 16.12.2020 from <https://hir.harvard.edu/armenias-velvet-revolution/>.

²⁴ Zaur Shiryev (2018), "For Azerbaijan, Armenia's political upheaval is a double-edged sword", *International Crisis Group*, 25.05.2018, Date of Accession: 16.12.2020 from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/azerbaijan/azerbaijan-armenias-political-upheaval-double-edged-sword>.

²⁵ Thomas de Waal (2018), "Armenia's revolution and the Karabakh conflict", *Carnegie Europe*, 22.05.2018, Date of Accession: 16.12.2020 from <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/76414>.

The main difference, however, has been observed in the discourses of Azerbaijani President. A detailed analysis of the discourses voiced by Aliyev is therefore essential to be able to reveal how the political shifts in Armenia have affected Azerbaijani President's position.

3. Current Study

This study aims at revealing the discursive differences in Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's position before and after the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia. This is chosen as a dividing point for a number of reasons. First of all, this revolution changed the political system of Armenia and former opposition became the government in power. That is, Azerbaijani President now had a country as opponent with formally more democratic system and all novel leadership. Secondly, in the same year, an early presidential vote was held in Azerbaijan, which was discussed to happen as a result of multiple factors including the intra-governmental crisis in Azerbaijan, changes to Azerbaijan's constitution in 2016, which had extended presidential term from 5 to 7 years and regional political crisis.²⁶

3.1. Methods

This is a qualitative study that employs politolinguistic discourse analysis as its main technique. The sample of the study includes the oral and written discourses of President Ilham Aliyev regarding the NK conflict and Armenia until the outbreak of the latest war. The primary data has been collected from the official website of the President (president.az) and the Presidential Library (preslib.az), on which his speeches are documented in video and text formats. Since President Aliyev has raised the issue in various contexts, platforms, and occasions reviewed, particularly, his speeches at international organizations and on nation-wide occasions, interviews with international media outlets and related statements, certain keywords are used including "Armenia", "Nagorno-Karabakh", "conflict" and "war" in order to find the related content. After a preliminary triangulation of the data based on the initial analysis of the speeches, written statements and interviews, a framework is drawn to carry out the final analysis. A number of criteria are considered including representativeness, intertextuality, intentionality, and situationality.

²⁶ RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service (2018), "Azerbaijan schedules snap presidential election in April", 05.02.2018, Date of Accession: 17.12.2020 from <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-snap-election-aliyev/29018696.html>.

The politolinguistic analysis of the discourses in this study is conducted based on three elements, namely; nomination, predication, and argumentation, as suggested by Reisigl.²⁷ By doing so, it is attempted to unravel how Self (i.e. Azerbaijan, Azerbaijanis, Azerbaijani leadership etc.) and Other (i.e. Armenia, Armenians, Armenian leadership etc.) were framed by Aliyev in two periods. With this framing, the paper illustrates how President Aliyev have indicated who the sides to the conflict are (nomination), what characteristics they carry (predication), and how conflict should be resolved, what Azerbaijani position is and why Azerbaijani position is so (argumentation).

Politolinguistic method is found to solve the problem of whether policy or language is more decisive as debated by political scientists and linguists. According to this approach, when a political speech is made, the speaker not only expresses his/her stance or takes a performative action, but also he/she puts forward a political action that makes the way for contextual, situational, and positional changes.²⁸

3.2. Analyzing Aliyev's Discourses

3.2.1. 2003-2018: Years of Hope, Patience, Frustration, and War

Ilham Aliyev won the presidential race in October 2003, months before his father – President Heydar Aliyev's death. Having been accompanying his father during the latter's political career and peace talks, Ilham Aliyev was neither new to politics, nor inexperienced. In his very first speech as President at his inauguration, Aliyev stated that, although his country sought peaceful means for the resolution of the conflict rather than war, their patience was not unending and they were going to liberate the occupied territories at any cost.²⁹ This argument was the first signal to show Armenia that he was concerned to subscribe to the policies devised by his predecessor. In his earlier addresses, the President referred to Armenia as being the aggressor and occupant of 20 % of Azerbaijani territories. However, he abstained from mentioning military option overtly. Primary arguments in Aliyev's first term were about the occupation, refugees and IDPs, the

²⁷ Martin Reisigl (2008), "Analyzing political rhetoric", in *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in The Social Sciences* (eds. by Ruth Wodak & Michal Krzyzanowski), Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁸ Lorella Cedroni (2013), "Politolinguistics. Towards a new analysis of political discourse", in *Multimodal Communication in Political Speech. Shaping Minds and Social Action. PS 2010. Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, Berlin: Springer, p. 221.

²⁹ Ilham Aliyev (2003), "Speeches, statements, interviews and declarations of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan", Presidential Library, Date of Accession: 18.12.2020 from <http://files.preslib.az/site/ialiyev/2003.pdf>, p. 4.

UNSC resolutions 822, 833, 874, 884, the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, and that Azerbaijan should advance in economy and military affairs to such a degree that Armenia was left with no option but withdrawing from NK and surrounding regions.

The first meeting between Aliyev and Kocharyan of Armenia took place in Geneva, Switzerland in December 2003. The two are discussed to have met 21 times in total; 8 of which had been official negotiations on the NK conflict.³⁰ 2006 was remarkable as there had been 3 official presidential meetings after a year of impasse in 2005. Aliyev told in the assembly of the Security Council of Azerbaijan on January 2 that the year gave “*hopes in the settlement process of Armenia-Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict*”.³¹

One of the main arguments of Aliyev was about the future status of NK, which had been the primary contradiction between the adversaries. Aliyev repeatedly argued that Azerbaijan would never accept a referendum in NK as it is stated in Azerbaijani constitution that a referendum can only be held in the entire country, not in a part of it. Nevertheless, the highest autonomy was offered within the Azerbaijani borders. For Aliyev, the biggest compromise – continuing the negotiations for 12 years – had already been made by Azerbaijan.³² Aliyev reiterated war rhetoric in front of Azerbaijani public by highlighting the rising military budget and advancing army of the country, particularly during his visits to regions of Azerbaijan, while he referred to the peace talks and future prospects of the mediation work of the OSCE Minsk Group in his speeches and interviews addressed to the international community.

In 2008, Serzh Sargsyan came to the power in Armenia, who served for two terms. Aliyev and Sargsyan had relatively more frequent meetings in the latter's first term, particularly until 2011, when the two had inconclusive negotiations in Kazan, Russia. After a year-long break since January 2012, the two Presidents met once again in Vienna on November 19, 2013. 2014 was one of the toughest years since the ceasefire in 1994. In August-September, the line of contact witnessed the most intense violations of ceasefire by far. Earlier that year, Azerbaijani President told that “*if the Armenian people wanted to live in peace with their neighbors, they first should*

³⁰ Vahe Ghukasyan (2019), “Frequency of meetings between leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan”, *Union of Informed Citizens*, 28.03.2019, Date of Accession: 18.12.2020 from <https://uic.am/en/5825>.

³¹ Ilham Aliyev (2006), “Speeches, statements, interviews and declarations of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, Presidential Library, Date of Accession: 18.12.2020 from <http://files.preslib.az/site/ialiyev/2006.pdf>, p. 8.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 52

give up on their criminal, bloodthirsty and illegal regime” and he continued by stating that “*the war is not over, only its first part. If Armenia does not want the second phase to begin, ...they should voluntarily withdraw from the occupied territories*”³³, signaling the future tension. Moreover, by using the term “*status quo*” a total of 25 times in his speeches in 2014, Azerbaijani President expressed his frustration stemming from the existing status quo and Armenia’s alleged effort to preserve it. It is worth mentioning that this number was 8 in 2013. On June 24, Aliyev, when answering a question about the conflict, told that he was not as optimistic as he had been after the Vienna meeting with President Sargsyan.³⁴

2016 had been the bloodiest year of the conflict since the 1994 ceasefire, causing a death toll of over 200.³⁵³⁶³⁷ During the four days of war in April, Armenian side announced the loss of control over 800 hectares of area, while Azerbaijan claimed to have taken approximately 2,000 hectares.³⁸ Aliyev was even more radical in his arguments about the conflict, Armenia, and its history right from the start of the year. For instance, during a meeting with a group of young Azerbaijanis, Aliyev claimed that contemporary Armenia was historically populated by Azerbaijanis and thus, they had the right to return not only to their homelands under occupation, but also to the territories of the current Armenian State.³⁹ He also criticized the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs harshly for trying to freeze the conflict rather than resolving it by emphasizing that “*they [the co-chairs] have the biggest role in “not solving” [emphasis added] the problem*”.⁴⁰ The President had replicated this discourse a few times before the April War. It was implied that there was no point in expecting any effective activities from the co-chairs. Consequently, on March 17, – two weeks prior to the outbreak of the clashes – Aliyev asserted that the primary task

³³ İlham Aliyev (2014), “Speeches, statements, interviews and declarations of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, Presidential Library, Date of Accession: 18.12.2020 from <http://files.preslib.az/site/ialiyev/2014.pdf>, p. 99.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³⁵ The figure is shown differently in various official and unofficial sources.

³⁶ Bradley Jardine (2018), “Armenians and Azerbaijanis commemorate two years since breakout of “April War””.

³⁷ International Crisis Group, “The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: A visual explainer”, 09.03.2021, Date of Accession: 19.12.2020 from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer>.

³⁸ Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2016), “Silahlı Qüvvələrimiz tərəfindən 2000 hektardan artıq ərazi azad edilib [Over 2000 hectares of area have been liberated by our armed forces]”, 18.05.2016, Date of Accession: 18.12.2020 from <https://mod.gov.az/az/news/silahli-quvvelerimiz-terefinden-2000-hektardan-artiq-erazi-azad-edilib-13044.html>.

³⁹ İlham Aliyev (2016), “Speeches, statements, interviews and declarations of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, Presidential Library, Date of Accession: 20.12.2020 from <http://files.preslib.az/site/ialiyev/2016.pdf>, p. 40.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

in front of Azerbaijan was strengthening its army and the Azerbaijani people were going to outface the problem.⁴¹

In the meeting of the Security Council on the April clashes on April 2, Azerbaijani leader presented the clashes as the next expression of Armenia's "*insidious policy*" and "*provocation*" against Azerbaijan. For Aliyev, the result of the war was "*a glorious victory*" of Azerbaijan. Moreover, the President claimed that Armenian side violated the ceasefire and committed provocation by attacking Azerbaijani positions while arguing elsewhere that Armenia wanted status quo to remain. Aliyev, surprisingly changing his long-lasting blaming position, praised the recent efforts of the co-chairs in the very same speech for putting forward new proposals.⁴²

Table I: Nominations and Predications before 2018

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

Nomination-Self	Predication	Nomination-Other	Predication
Azerbaijan	<p>Being more independent than Armenia</p> <p>Having suffered from the war</p> <p>Having lost its territories and people</p> <p>Having the highest number of forced immigrants per capita in the world</p> <p>Multicultural</p>	Armenia	<p>Committing terrorism against Azerbaijanis</p> <p>Being unconstructive</p> <p>Wanting to protract the process and confuse international community</p> <p>Mono-ethnic</p> <p>Being a state established on historical Azerbaijani lands</p>
We Azerbaijanis	<p>Being ready to compromise and provide high autonomy to NK</p> <p>Having welcomed Armenians in NK as guests</p>	Armenians	<p>Not having the right to self-determination as they have already done so</p> <p>Believing they can use self-determination wherever they live</p> <p>Having been moved there by the Russian Empire</p> <p>Having come to NK as guests</p>
		Armenian lobby	Placing influence and pressure on international organizations
		Armenian regime	<p>Criminal, bloodthirsty and illegal</p> <p>Trying to mislead international and Armenian society</p>

Aliyev's discourses following the war were mainly pro-peace. It was pointed out that, Azerbaijan, likewise the co-chairs, wanted the peaceful resolution of the conflict.⁴³ In an interview with a Russian journalist, Aliyev said that a compromise was possible under certain conditions.⁴⁴ However, no substantial progress had been achieved in further meetings of the Presidents and the peace process was interrupted due to the political turmoil in Armenia.

3.2.2. 2018-2020: Back to Scratch

Azerbaijan held a snap presidential election on April 11, 2018, which resulted in the commencement of Aliyev's fourth term as the President of Azerbaijan. On the other side of the border, meanwhile, Armenia underwent a political crisis. Unlike its analogues in other post-Soviet countries, the Velvet Revolution in Armenia did not evolve into an armed conflict between the governmental forces and opposition. Sargsyan decided to resign on April 23.⁴⁵ Subsequently, the election of Nikol Pashinyan as the Prime Minister was the completion of the transition from semi-presidential to parliamentary republic.⁴⁶

Aliyev's most repeated argument in the early 2018 was related to the success in the April War. He referred to the liberated and reconstructed village Jojug Marjanli (*Cocuq Mərcanlı*) as the symbol of Azerbaijan's victory.⁴⁷ As for the revolution in Armenia, on June 6, Aliyev reminded of his previous statements that Armenia's previous regime had been "*criminal junta*" and now the people of Armenia had finally come to understand that. He also expressed his hope that the new leadership in Armenia would refrain from repeating the mistakes made by its predecessor and put serious efforts to reach the resolution of the conflict.⁴⁸ Moreover, Aliyev indicated that Azerbaijan's policies had an impact on the failure of the previous administration and the revolutionary change of leadership in Armenia, particularly, through insulating Armenia from regional projects and defeating in the April War.⁴⁹

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 116.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Rayhan Demytrie (2018), "Why Armenia 'Velvet Revolution' won without a bullet fired", *BBC*, 01.05.2018, Date of Accession: 20.12.2020 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43948181>.

⁴⁶ TASS, "Opposition leader Pashinyan elected Armenian PM", 08.05.2018, Date of Accession: 23.12.2020 from <https://tass.com/world/1003281>.

⁴⁷ İlham Aliyev (2018), "Speeches, statements, interviews and declarations of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan", Presidential Library, Date of Accession: 21.12.2020 from <http://files.preslib.az/site/ialiyev/2018.pdf>, pp. 9, 28, 39, 257.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 149, 170–171.

Despite the initial expectations towards rapprochement, not receiving any solid signal about compromise, Azerbaijani President began to criticize the new government of Armenia soon calling it a repressive dictatorship.⁵⁰ Aliyev also accused Armenian administration of promoting Nazism and Fascism several times.⁵¹ Aliyev pointed out the similarities between the Pashinyan administration and Azerbaijani administration in 1992-1993. The main similarity, as mentioned by Aliyev, was the lack of experience and political knowledge for coming to the power directly from the streets without required preparation. In fact, referring to the Azerbaijani administration of the early 1990s was not a new thing in Aliyev's discourses. Starting from 2018, Azerbaijani President intensified his rhetoric that blamed the regime in Azerbaijan before Haydar Aliyev, namely the Azerbaijan Popular Front-Musavat coalition, for allowing Armenia to take the territories from Azerbaijan.⁵²

As mentioned earlier, the democratic changes in Armenia were discussed to have generated hopes in official Baku at first. The two leaders had four informal meetings until their first official – Vienna meeting on March 29, 2019. However, after his meetings with Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan, Aliyev clearly stated that the situation was not promising. In this pessimism, Armenian side's rhetoric had also been decisive. While Azerbaijan's position regarding unacceptability of independence for NK and indispensability of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity has never changed, Armenian leaders have replicated the right to self-determination of the people of NK. It is necessary to mention here that Armenian side has avoided to accentuate that this self-determination should not be limited to the Armenian population of the region and must include Azerbaijanis as well. In response to this preoccupation, Aliyev made it clear that for him there was no such thing as *“the people of NK but population consisting of Armenians and Azerbaijanis”*.⁵³ Later on, Aliyev expressed his concerns over the disappearance of the achieved progress by telling that *“2019 has been lost for the resolution of the conflict”*.⁵⁴ The President

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁵¹ Ilham Aliyev (2019), “Speeches, statements, interviews and declarations of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, Presidential Library, Date of Accession: 22.12.2020 from <http://files.preslib.az/site/ialiyevev/2019.pdf>, pp. 132, 194.

⁵² Ilham Aliyev (2018), “Speeches, statements, interviews and declarations of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, Presidential Library, Date of Accession: 21.12.2020 from <http://files.preslib.az/site/ialiyevev/2018.pdf>, pp. 108–109, 125, 258.

⁵³ Ilham Aliyev (2019), “Speeches, statements, interviews and declarations of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, Presidential Library, Date of Accession: 22.12.2020 from <http://files.preslib.az/site/ialiyevev/2019.pdf>, p. 125.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

explained that the reason for this stalemate was the contradicting position of Armenian PM. That is, first, the Armenian side wanted to include unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in the peace process as a primary party. Aliyev argued that, however, Armenian leadership changed their position on this issue but did a more serious harm to the process by stating that “*Karabakh is Armenia, and that’s it*”.⁵⁵ As a response to this statement, Aliyev said; “*Karabakh is Azerbaijan and exclamation mark*”.⁵⁶

Despite the perceived failure in 2019, 2020 witnessed a breakthrough in the history of the conflict. The leaders of the two sides came together in front of international public to discuss the conflict and future prospects within the scope of the Munich Security Conference. Rather than being a genuine discussion, the encounter seemed more like “*keeping up with the Joneses*”. Both leaders tried to justify their position by referring to history. Nevertheless, there were a number of ostensible agreement on certain domains, including mutual efforts for preventing escalation, need for the people-to-people contact and exchange of journalists.⁵⁷ The positive statements heard in this debate could be interpreted as the politicians’ efforts to seem inclined to peace.

Another moot point between Aliyev and Pashinyan occurred during the EU Eastern Partnership Summit, which was held on June 18, 2020 through video conference due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Aliyev restated his argument that Karabakh is a part of Azerbaijan and blamed Pashinyan for his “*effort to nullify the essence and format of the negotiations*”⁵⁸ by attempting to join Armenia and NK.

The tensions reached a climax in July with the outbreak of skirmishes near the Azerbaijani region Tovuz, where the ceasefire had recursively been broken before as well. This area is located out of the Azerbaijani territories claimed by Armenian breakaway region of NK. As a result of the fires from both sides, a number of military personnel, including a Major General and

⁵⁵ Joshua Kucera (2019), “Pashinyan calls for unification between Armenia and Karabakh”, *Eurasianet*, 06.08.2019, Date of Accession: 22.12.2020 from <https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-calls-for-unification-between-armenia-and-karabakh>.

⁵⁶ İlham Aliyev (2019), “Speeches, statements, interviews and declarations of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, p. 212.

⁵⁷ Munich Security Conference, “Conversation “An update on Nagorno-Karabakh””, 15.02.2020, Date of Accession: 22.12.2020 from <https://securityconference.org/en/medialibrary/asset/conversation-an-update-on-nagorno-karabakh-20200215-1830/>.

⁵⁸ İlham Aliyev (2020), “İlham Aliyev attended Summit of Eastern Partnership countries in format of video conference”, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 18.06.2020, Date of Accession: 23.12.2020 from <https://en.president.az/articles/39235>.

a Colonel of Azerbaijani Army, and civilians were killed.⁵⁹ The clashes fostered war discourses by both sides. Azerbaijani President blamed Armenian side for conducting provocations in order to disorientate domestic opinion from the economic and political issues in Armenia. Moreover, the President told that Armenian leadership showed its hypocrisy once again by provoking Azerbaijan and appealing to the international community for help to de-escalate the situation.⁶⁰

Table II: Nominations and Predications after 2018

Nomination-Self	Predication	Nomination-Other	Predication
We	Ethnically cleansed	They	Arrogating historical sites
Azerbaijanis	Having been killed	Armenians	Having been brought to
	Historically living in the region		Karabakh, not historical residents
	Victims of genocide		Lying, blackmailing, devious
			Raising kids with hatred against Turks and Muslims

⁵⁹ *BBC* (2020), “Azerbaijan general among troops killed in Armenia border clash”, 14.07.2020, Date of Accession: 24.12.2020 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53402476>.

⁶⁰ Ilham Aliyev (2020), “Ilham Aliyev chaired meeting of Security Council”, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 13.07.2020, Date of Accession: 23.12.2020 from <https://en.president.az/articles/39596>.

Azerbaijan	<p>Having insulated Armenia from regional project</p> <p>Having stronger army, bigger economy and power to take the territories back</p> <p>Internationally recognized owner of the territories</p> <p>Right according to international law and international organizations</p>	Armenia	Always being in hostile relations with neighbors
		Armenian side	<p>Being historically Azerbaijani lands</p> <p>Being unable to put forward serious arguments</p> <p>Claiming and trying to attain others' territories</p> <p>Conducting provocations repeatedly</p> <p>Destructive</p> <p>Failed-state</p> <p>Fascist</p> <p>Having improper, false, and puny attempts</p> <p>Having islamophobia</p> <p>Occupant</p> <p>Promoting Nazism and Fascism</p> <p>Using violence against civilians and children</p> <p>Violating international law</p>
Turks	Ethnically cleansed	Armenian PM	Having no knowledge of history
Muslims	Cleansed	Armenian lobby	Buying foreign politicians

Azerbaijani monuments/historical sites	Fictively Armenianized Having been vandalized	Armenian nationalists/gangs	Executioner Fascist
More than 1 million Azerbaijanis	Being refugee or IDP	Armenian historians	Master in falsifying history
		Nagorno-Karabakh Republic	Being a part of Azerbaijan Fictional, not recognized Having no nation, but population consisting of Armenians and Azerbaijanis

The analysis shows that there have been some variations in Aliyev's discourses post-2018 period. However, the perdurable aspect of his rhetoric after the revolution in Armenia has been despondency and dissatisfaction with Armenia's new leadership. The hope coming with the democratic change in Armenia seems to have vanished with Pashinyan's failure to make the course of Armenian NK policies more constructive.⁶¹⁶² Aliyev intensified his arguments about the unlikelihood of peaceful resolution of the conflict and, if that was the case, he argued, Azerbaijani Army could retake the occupied territories any time when Azerbaijani side concluded that the negotiations were going to prove abortive.

Conclusion

The analysis of President Ilham Aliyev's discourses has shown that he had referred mainly to Azerbaijan, Azerbaijanis, and Azerbaijani IDPs as "*Self*" before 2018. This can be interpreted as

⁶¹ Thomas de Waal (2019), "Why the long conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh could heat up again", *World Politics Review*, 18.10.2019, Date of Accession: 22.12.2020 from <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28275/why-the-long-conflict-over-nagorno-karabakh-could-heat-up-again>.

⁶² Joshua Kucera (2020), "Azerbaijani president calls into question negotiations with Armenia", *Eurasianet*, 07.07.2020, Date of Accession: 23.12.2020 from <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijani-president-calls-into-question-negotiations-with-armenia>.

a part of the nation-building process after the collapse of the Soviet Union and an effort to achieve international recognition of occupation of Azerbaijani territories and victimization of Azerbaijani people. He had repeatedly mentioned the fact that 20 % of internationally recognized Azerbaijani territory was occupied and in consequence of this more than 1 million Azerbaijanis were forced to leave their homes. Aliyev uttered this also against domestic public in order to reason economic challenges faced in the late 1990s and early 2000s. After Azerbaijan had started to export its oil and gas and its economy had started to grow, his rhetoric evolved into more achievement discourse that emphasized how Azerbaijan managed to leave Armenia behind. He insisted on his belief that, by economically developing, Azerbaijan would sooner or later return its territories as Azerbaijan's developments would give the state the capacity to insulate Armenia and force its government to surrender. Other was also framed in a few number of ways as the President put the blame partly on the historical conjuncture of the time and imperialistic policies of the Soviet Union. Armenian State and regime, however, were most mentioned as the primary perpetrator of the conflict and occupation in Aliyev's discourses.

After 2018, on the other hand, one could observe a more diverse nomination of "*Self*", which included Turks and Muslims as Azerbaijani President desired to attain the support of Turkic and Islamic nations individually and within international organizations. The conceptions of "*Other*" were far more varied. For instance, the President accused Armenian nationalist gangs for triggering the dispute more, rather than the political leaders. Moreover, Aliyev more recently used the conflict in his discourses for targeting the opposition parties in Azerbaijan. The initial creators of the NK conflict, therefore, have been said to be the then inefficacious Azerbaijani government on one side, whose successors are one of the most active opposition groups currently in Azerbaijan and radical Armenian nationalist gangs on the other side.

What can be inferred from the analysis of President Aliyev's discourses about the general tendency of peace talks is that when he expresses his hopes and appreciates the mediation efforts of the Minsk Group co-chairs, there occur more chances for negotiations at ministerial and highest executive levels. On the contrary, if international community is criticized and pro-war discourses prevail, the negotiations reach an impasse, and even the conflict turns into an open warfare. Therefore, the 44-Day War should not be regarded as an unforeseen development. It was rather a logical sequel of the pro-war discourses. This is crucial to acknowledge in the sense that, while one could not have predicted the exact time when the war would start, actors having the

capacity to prevent the escalation, such as the OSCE and its Minsk Group co-chairs, particularly Russia and the United States, by pushing the parties to get engaged more substantial talks should have taken adequate preventive measures. On the contrary, the war language had been ignored or taken for granted.

Although this study has analyzed Aliyev's NK discourses since 2003 and revealed significant findings, it should be evaluated as one of the pioneers for the discursive analysis of the NK conflict. Therefore, a number of limitations need to be taken into account. First of all, this study is one-sided in the sense that it excludes the analysis of the Armenian leader's discourses. Language barrier has been the reason for this. A further direction of research may be the conduct of a comparative analysis. Another limitation can be said to be the research technique. As mentioned before, discourse analysis as a method has no single or universal fashion. For such a large size of sample (Aliyev's speeches in which he talked about the NK conflict) and the universe (Aliyev's speeches) that the sample is taken from, the method used in this research is believed to be the most feasible. However, for different aspects and facets of the conflict, other types of discourse analysis can be utilized. This would enable us to have a more thorough understanding of the conflict.

This research was designed to reveal how nomination, predication, and argumentation in President Ilham Aliyev's discourses about the NK conflict showed variation before and after 2018. The findings have shown that there have been significant intertextual differences not only between two periods but also within the periods. The main reasons behind these variations are discussed to be the domestic changes and developments in Armenia, which have had implications for the conflict and Azerbaijan. Moreover, domestic political and social determinants have played a role to some extent in the shaping of Aliyev's NK discourses. Pre-2018 period is found to be characteristic more with hopeful and constructive discourses while since 2018 Aliyev has uttered more dissatisfaction, frustration due to the inconclusiveness of the peace process.

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